Some succulent memories

PART 5 Lost and found in Honduras

After two weeks of exploring for plants with Elwood Molseed, he dropped me off in Mexico City in early August, 1959, and I began preparing for two weeks in Honduras. I was quickly confronted with a problem: in California I had been told that the tourist card that was valid for Mexico would also cover Honduras, but I now found that because the card did not show proof that I was a United States citizen I would have to produce such proof in order to visit Honduras. I had no such proof on my person and was understandably discouraged until the American Embassy informed me that any American citizen living in Mexico who knew that I was an American citizen could vouch for my status. I immediately thought of Dudley Gold (1897–1990), who at the time was living in Mexico City. He was glad to help, and we met a day or two later at the Embassy, where, in a solemn ceremony, he vouched for my status as a US citizen. Dudley was a charming, knowledgeable cactophile, resident for many years at Cananea, Sonora, where he worked for an American copper-mining company and first learned to love cacti. He lived most of his life in Mexico and was one of the founders of the Mexican cactus society. He was hospitable and helpful to many American cactus-enthusiasts when they visited Mexico.

Just why was it important for me to go to Honduras, a country botanically rich but seldom visited by plant enthusiasts? In Part One of this series I briefly mentioned the reason: a single herbarium sheet I found among others I had received on loan from the herbarium in Geneva, Switzerland. In the late 1950s I had applied to the herbaria in London, Vienna, Paris, Munich, New York, Washington, Chicago, and St Louis for loans of their specimens of epiphytic cacti. This had to be done through an institution where the specimens would be kept in standard herbarium cases, and I am grateful that the University of California provided this service for me. As the boxes of specimens arrived, I would spend Saturdays at the UC garden typing out the label data and determining or confirming the identity of each species; I then would attach a determination slip giving my opinion of the identity, with my name and date. Older sheets may have several such labels, which provide a good record of specialists’ identifications. Being taxonomically neutral, the herbarium curators usually file the returned specimens under the most recent determinations.

To the few people who have seen one, a herbarium specimen seems of little value because the flowers and leaves soon lose all their color and the flattened plants no longer have their natural forms. But to a specialist, the color and plant-